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**"He descended into Hell."**

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## **OBSERVATIONS**

**ON THE**

**DESCENT OF CHRIST INTO HELL.**

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**BY THE REV.**

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## OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

### DESCENT OF CHRIST INTO HELL.

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THE festivals and services of the Church are a tacit rehearsal of the articles of the Apostles' creed. They present an annual contemplation of every point of the Apostles' doctrine. Good Friday is a celebration of the "crucifixion and death" of Christ; while Easter Sunday celebrates his "resurrection." Easter Even is a commemoration of the belief of the Church in the burial of our Lord's body, and in the condition of the human soul of our divine Redeemer during the period of its separation from the body. The union of the two natures, the human and divine, in the one Word, of the humanity and divinity of our Lord in one Christ, is a deep and holy mystery, into which it were not right too minutely or curiously to inquire. Holy Scripture, however, declares that Christ was made in all points like unto his

brethren, sin only excepted. The creed of the universal Church seals to us the truth, that "Christ was perfect God, and perfect man, of a reasonable soul, and human flesh, subsisting." Our inquiry then is to be, (and we make it not in a spirit of speculation or unwary curiosity, but with an earnest desire to remove what we know has been the cause of error, and a stumbling-block of offence to many, and with a wish to show the encouragement to be derived from a statement of the truth,) our inquiry is to be, into the condition of the human soul of our blessed Redeemer, during the time of its separation from the body. The belief of the Church on this point is contained in the article of the creed "He descended into hell." As the word "buried" alludes to the circumstances attendant upon the body of our Lord, after his death<sup>1</sup>; so the words "descended into hell" refer to the state and condition of his soul during the interval of forty hours, which elapsed between the death of our Lord, in the sight of an assembled nation, and of his appearing again in the human form on the dawn of the third day to Mary and his brethren. The history of the introduction of these words into the creed itself proves the truth of this assertion. These words were not inserted in the

<sup>1</sup> In the words "buried, He descended into hell," these latter words do not allude to the body of our Lord, which was buried; yet, by their situation in the creed, between the death and resurrection of Christ, they must allude to something which intervened between those two events. We infer, therefore, that they refer to the state of the human soul of our blessed Lord during the interval between his death and resurrection.



original reading of the Apostles' creed. They were only added in the fifth century. A sect of persons, calling themselves "Phantasiasts," arose in the Church at this time, and said that the death of Christ was only a trance, or fainting fit, "deliquium." They endeavoured thereby to disprove the reality of the death of Christ, and therefore to undermine the whole foundation of the Christian faith. The holy Catholic Church at this time protested against this sect and heresy, by inserting in her creeds a particular condemnation of this opinion of the Phantasiasts. The Latin words "ad inferna," used to express the belief of the Church against this heresy (for it was first inserted in the Western Church), simply imply hades, or the invisible state, the place of the dead. The Church merely held up the truth, and protested against error, leaving it, in her wisdom, entirely open to decide where or what this state was. The translation of the latin words "ad inferna" in our creed into the word "hell," has been the source of much error and misconception. The word, as used in our creed, must not be considered in the strict and limited meaning to which custom usually confines it: or otherwise our assent is given to a doctrine, opposed to the sense of Scripture, unsanctioned by antiquity, unsupported by the creed of any Church existing in the world. The words addressed by our blessed Lord to his fellow-sufferer on the cross, forbid the interpretation of the word used in the creed, to allude to that place allotted for the punishment of the wicked. Christ desired to provide a



source of consolation to the dying penitent; and He spake of his being with Him in Paradise, and not of a place of torment. The declaration, too, "It is finished," equally forbids this interpretation of the words, as it implies that all the sufferings of Christ were ended. Neither would Christ preach to those whose fate was unalterably fixed for ever: for there is no repentance, in the grave, no change after this time of probation is accomplished. The day of the general resurrection is always mentioned in Holy Scripture as the day on which the spirits of the just, resummoned to join their glorious and risen bodies, enter into their final reward; and the spirits of the condemned receive their final condemnation. If, then, the morning of the general resurrection be the moment of final reward, and final condemnation; and if the soul leaves its earthly tabernacle of the flesh, before the breaking of that awful day; it is evident there must be some place, in which the soul must rest between the interval of its separation from the body, and of its being summoned to rejoin the body at the moment of its rising from the tomb. This was the teaching of the Catholic Church for the first four centuries. This is the belief of the Anglican Church, a branch of that Catholic Church. The friends of the departed saint are taught in the office of the burial of the dead, to offer their prayers for the hastening of Christ's kingdom, that there may then be a perfect consummation and bliss to the believer, both in body and in soul. Thus, then, the Church of England

maintains an intermediate state. The Church of England protests against two classes of error on this subject. It protests against those who, in their too great desire to run at all hazards, directly in the extreme from the Church of Rome, embrace the erroneous opinion, that the soul, on the day of its separation from the body, enters into glory, or upon the fulness of its reward. It protests still more strongly, perhaps, against the more dangerous error of those, who maintain that the souls of the faithful admitted to this intermediate state, can be at all changed in their condition by the prayers of the survivors, the masses of the priest, or the largesses of friends. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain," is represented as the anthem of the blessed in Heaven. The saint who has learned on earth that song of praise, who in the hour of his departure can say, with the first Christian martyr, "Lord Jesus, into thy hands I commend my spirit," will, when absent from the body, be alway present with the Lord. The soul that commences on earth the language and happiness of Heaven, will continue to enjoy that happiness in the intermediate state, (whatever that state may be), until it receives its perfect consummation at the coming of the Lord in glory. So also, if the happiness of Heaven consists in the expression of gratitude and love to the Lord Christ for redemption, and the soul hath entered into the unseen world without any faith in Christ, or any love to Him, then must there ever be to that spirit an absence from the Lord. No prayers, nor



tears, nor payments, nor masses, can restore to the departed spirit, love and gratitude to the Redeemer, and, therefore, cannot bestow a fitness or a power to participate in the joys of the Redeemed. The Church of England thus believes in an Intermediate State<sup>2</sup>: in which those who have departed in the true faith of God's holy name, in a cessation from their troubles, in a resting from their labours, in their presence with the Lord, receive an earnest and foretaste of their future glory. The Church of England holds a Middle State, where the souls of the faithful dead rest till the morning of the resurrection; when there will be a perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and in soul; an addition to the peace and rest which the souls of the just experience in their disembodied state, during the interval which elapses between the moment of their separation from the body, and the hour of their being summoned back to the risen body, to reign with Christ. The Church

<sup>2</sup> The belief in a Middle or Intermediate State, is not a belief in Purgatory. They are not synonymous or convertible terms. The holy Catholic Church, including that branch existing among us, believes in a Middle State. It, however, protests against this Middle State being a Purgatory, as *a fond thing*. The Church believes in a Middle State, where the souls of the faithful departed *rest* till the morning of the first resurrection. It believes that there will then be a perfect consummation and bliss, an addition to the peace and rest which the souls of the just experience, till they are summoned to reign with Christ. We believe in a Middle State, we believe the Soul of our blessed Redeemer entered into that State during the period his sacred body lay in the grave; but we deny that *this State* "is a State of expiation for the sins of the good," or "that the souls there detained are helped by any masses, prayers, alms, or other good works of the living."

would furthermore have her people to believe, (it is the event commemorated on her Easter Even, it is the teaching of Holy Scripture, it is sanctioned by the Epistles remaining of the Apostles themselves, and by the writings of the early Fathers, and of those Apostolical men who lived nearest to the events themselves,) that whatever the Intermediate State may be, that into that State Jesus Christ entered; and that while his holy body was silent in the dust of the grave, his sinless spirit descended into Hell, or Hades, the Intermediate State, in which are the disembodied spirits of the departed. He was in all points made like unto his brethren, like to them in life, like to them in suffering, like to them in temptations, like to them in death, like to them in the grave, like to them in his soul entering the hades, or Intermediate State, in which the spirits, absent from the body, are. Holy Church supposes that as through all the stages of humanity, through infancy, childhood, youth, and manhood; through the long variety of human infirmities, miseries, and sorrows, in hungerings, and wearyings, He was like unto his brethren; and that as his brethren are also again to see Him as He is, and to be like to Him in their human nature, risen, ascended, and glorified; so also in the moment of departure He was like unto his brethren. As the body of the saint is committed, with decent ceremonial, to the ground, and as the soul of the departing saint enters into a state of rest, to await its consummation of happiness in glory; so also the bruised body of our Lord was buried with



all the respect and reverence the shortness of the time permitted : and so also his blessed spirit, during the period of its separation from the body, entered into the region of the spirits of the departed. Ample testimony could be produced to this being the teaching of the early Catholic Church. The Church of America has gone to the length of inserting this belief in a bracket in her creeds, after the article of the creed itself. This is the opinion of the English Church, and has ever been held by a long chain of her best divines. Man may be considered as the heir of a threefold state : the first, this scene of grace, trial, and probation ; the second, that wondrous and mysterious region where the soul will exist in its temporary separation from the body ; the third, that fixed and eternal estate of never-ceasing, ever increasing happiness or misery, that state, in which there will be a consummation of reward, or of condemnation both in soul and body. This teaching of the Church is fraught with comfort and consolation to the faithful believer. The faithful man will find, on earth, divine grace, and the presence of Christ to help him in the time of trouble, as he will know Jesus who was once on earth, a Man of sorrows, can still sympathize, in His exaltation, with the infirmities of human sorrow. He will hope for glory, and for a deliverance from the dominion of the grave hereafter, as " Christ is risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept." He will find peace in the moment of the separation of the soul from the body, as Jesus once reposed in the

human body in the sepulchre, in the sleep and dust of death, and once entered, in the human soul, into the region of departed spirits, to be the rod, and stay, and staff, and comfort of the spirit of the believer, through the dark "valley of the shadow of death."

THE END.





